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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: CEC CHAIRMAN MORE THE PROBLEM THAN THE SOLUTION

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: During a meeting with DAS Erica Barks-Ruggles, Turkmenistan's Central Election Commission chairman declared Turkmenistan a democratic nation for the past 5,000 years and needs little in the way of reform. The chairman provided the delegation with facts and figures related to the December 9 provincial government elections, and expended significant energy trying to convince the delegation that Turkmenistan's electoral system meets international standards. The two sides agreed to disagree, but it was clear to the delegation that Garryev, a throwback to Soviet days, will not be a constructive partner on reform. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) On December 8, a delegation led by Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Erica Barks-Ruggles

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met with longtime Central Election Commission Chairman Myrat Garryev to discuss democratic transition in Turkmenistan and the December 9 provincial government elections. Garryev described Turkmenistan as a democratic nation with free speech and press where people of all ethnicities have equal rights. According to Garryev, Turkmenistan and her people have a 5,000 year history of democratic traditions dating back to Oguz Han, and need nothing in the way of electoral reform.

14. (SBU) For example, he said, elections take place at many levels, from municipality to presidential, and now there is a choice of candidates. There were six candidates for president earlier this year, and there were 560 candidates are competing for the 240 seats in the regional Halk Maslahatys, or People's Councils, elections on December 9.

15. He noted that President Niyazov completely transformed the state, in all spheres of life, including culture, education, and democracy, and that he was pleased to announce that Berdimuhamedov has been following in Niyazov's direction. Mimicking President Berdimuhamedov, Garryev noted that a new revival is taking place to improve the lives of citizens and the environment.

¶6. (SBU) He emphasized that Turkmenistan's universal suffrage begins for all citizens at 18, and district election officials assist the old and the sick, and any others who need help to cast their vote. "We track them down," he said. (NOTE: Post has learned from citizens here that if they fail to vote, election officials knock on their doors and demand that they fulfill their civic duty. These officials can and do cast the ballot on behalf of citizens, who never see their own ballots. END NOTE.)

¶7. (SBU) DAS Barks-Ruggles underscored what the President and Secretary Rice have said about democracy. To be considered a

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democratic nation, she said, a country needs to do more than just hold free, fair, transparent, and open elections. There are two other components: civil society and good governance, including accountability to the citizens, rule of law, and fighting corruption. She noted that the U.S. has a long history of working with governments and civic organizations on all three pillars in a host of countries across the region and asked the IFES representative in the delegation to explain the types of U.S. partnership and programs that were available.

¶8. (SBU) IFES Country Director for Azerbaijan Dan Blessington reviewed the type of work IFES has done in over 100 countries. He noted that Turkmenistan's electoral system does not meet international standards. Although multiple candidates compete for seats, they all come from the single legal political party in Turkmenistan. Further, no information about candidates, beyond their biographies, is provided to voters here, so there is nothing to distinguish one candidate from another. Garryev, appearing offended, challenged Blessington to visit Turkmenistan in the future and monitor Turkmen elections. Blessington commented that in Azerbaijan IFES is currently training election officials, working on voter lists and a civil registry, educating voters, and assisting on the reformation of election codes and laws. Garryev commented that "these things are probably required in Azerbaijan, but they are not relevant in Turkmenistan." When Blessington noted that Turkmenistan

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would probably be the only country, then, where this type of work was not needed, Garryev responded, "yes, that is correct."

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT: Garryev is an engaging, but somewhat over-the-top political character straight out of Soviet central casting who was clearly chosen years ago to guard the electoral gates of Turkmenistan. He is also one of the last powerful bureaucrats chosen by former President Niyazov to implement his key policies. Nevertheless, some other elements of the Turkmenistan government are interested in cooperation in the electoral sphere, and the OSCE, UNDP, and the German government are assisting with the review of Turkmenistan's election law.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: As international attention focuses increasingly on the December 2008 parliamentary elections, however, the deeper question will ultimately be how to encourage Turkmenistan to undertake modest electoral reform in practice, while Garryev remains in office. (Note: Garryev commented that the parliamentary elections would take place March 14, 2008, a much earlier date than we have heard elsewhere. End note.) He is much more of a hindrance than a help. END COMMENT.

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